

Senate Education Committee Testimony 03/24/2023

Adult Education and Literacy providers

Hello, I am Michelle Faust, a resident of Irasburg, and the Executive Director of Northeast Kingdom Learning Services also known as NEKLS.

I am Brian Kravitz, a resident of Waterbury, and the Development and Outreach Director of Central Vermont Adult Basic Education, CVABE.

I am Sean-Marie Oller, a resident of Bennington, and Executive Director of the Tutorial Center

SLIDE 1 Sean-Marie

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to present to you today on behalf of the Vermont Adult Education and Literacy Network in regards to our request for additional base funding of \$1.5 million.

SLIDE 2 Michelle

Our network is comprised of the four Adult Education and Literacy providers in the State, which includes: Central Vermont Adult Basic Education in green, Northeast Kingdom Learning Services in yellow, The Tutorial Center in pink, and Vermont Adult Learning in blue.

As you can see, the AEL Network providers cover the entire state and we are able to serve students regardless of where they live.

Our request is for an additional 1.5 million dollars added to our current base. We have identified 5 cost categories that are in need of additional financial support:

- Staffing salaries and benefits
- Technology needs and software upgrades
- Hardware, textbooks, supplies and other instructional materials
- Outreach and Recruitment
- Property maintenance and services

It is important to note that the House included \$700,000 dollars in one-time funding for the Adult Education and Literacy Network in its 2023 budget. This is a little less than half of what we need going forward. As it was one-time, without a consistent increase we will not be able to sustain the positive steps we took with the funding. A \$1.5 million increase to our base will allow us to provide the high quality of education that our students need. Providing basic education to our least skilled and least proficient adults, giving Vermonters the opportunity to earn a high school diploma or GED, providing career and job readiness, and providing needed services to our English Language Learners is vital to Vermont's economic outlook.

SLIDE 3 Brian The Need

Like many organizations and employers in Vermont, the AEL Network's operating costs have risen and are expected to continue to do so. In spite of cutting back where we can, running lean budgets, and two one-time budget adjustments, all 4 VT-AELN providers are operating in

deficits. We have not received a substantial and sustainable increase to our base funding for almost 30 years.

During COVID, like all schools in Vermont, to meet the demands of Online and blended learning, we had to quickly upgrade our technology and network systems, provide students with access to laptops and increased Internet bandwidth. Unlike our public schools, we didn't have access to funds for these upgrades. These upgrades were immediate responses, and there is more work to be done. Technology requires frequent upgrades, especially in academic settings, and we must be in a position to stay ahead of the curve and meet the needs of students and job sectors.

Inflation has caused increases to supplies, heating, rents, and all other costs of doing business.

Due to the nature of our student body, those with disabilities, English Language Learners, and the most disenfranchised from education as a whole, it is imperative that we have highly trained educators on staff. We have had to increase salaries to both retain and hire new teachers. The cost of benefits has also risen sharply.

We are very grateful for the budget adjustments of \$350,000 in 2022 and \$700,000 in 2023, however these one-time funds have not filled our basic needs. We have had to reduce expenses and we are as lean as we can possibly be while still providing a level of high-quality services that our students require and deserve. We need additional base funding added to the budget to fill vacancies, and hire additional staff as our student numbers are increasing. We also need to increase wages to be able to attract new staff and to retain our teachers. As educators are leaving the profession due to pay and conditions, we must be able to remain competitive.

We know that there are many more Vermonters who need our services and we cannot reach them without funding to support robust Outreach and Recruitment statewide.

With more students, the need for additional textbooks, supplies and other instructional materials comes as well.

Your support in providing our request for an additional 1.5 million dollars to the base will ensure that we can adequately serve and reach more Vermonters, now and in the future. It will help them to build the assets they need to gain sustainable employment and become more active in Vermont's economic outlook.

SLIDE 4 Sean Marie FY23 State Appropriations

We are grateful for the one-time funding of \$700,000 that we received in this 2023 fiscal year.

Central Vermont Adult Basic Education (CVABE) is expecting a 31% increase in enrollment over two years. The additional funding allowed them to provide a much needed cost of living increase for staff, greatly helping to reduce the high rate of staff turnover and **fill positions that had been vacant.**

Vermont Adult Learning (VAL) has served more students during the first half of FY23 than they've seen since before the pandemic. VAL continues to **expand and**

improve their offerings through their Online Learning Center. With the additional one-time funding, VAL was able to provide a cost of living increase and raise base rates for new staff. This helped greatly to reduce the high rate of staff turnover they were seeing and helped them to fill positions that had been empty for months.

Northeast Kingdom Learning Services, Inc. (NEKLS) last year experienced an **increase in Adult Basic Education level students of 50% over the prior year and they are well on their way to an additional 20% increase above that in FY23.** NEKLS was able to **increase outreach to students, improve salaries for current staff, and hire new staff with competitive wages to fill vacant positions.**

The Tutorial Center (TTC) was able to buy **new classroom computers and equipment to better teach remotely.** Instructors and students needed access to newer tech programs and devices, as well as reliable technology in order to serve students who have many reasons for not being able to attend sessions in person. We have shown an **exponential increase in ELL students.** Most of these are Afghan students who have refugee status in Vermont.

One-time funding increases helped in the short-term and your action is required just to maintain the current level of services that we offer.

Slide 5 - Michelle AEL findings language in Act 183 of 2022

The value of Vermont's AEL system to commerce and economic development was recognized last year by the addition of the findings on this slide to S.11.

It is also important to note that unlike other nonprofits in VT, AEL has a statutory role in providing adult education and a path to a high school diploma or GED. AEL's serve the most vulnerable Vermonters, many of our students are in need of Basic Adult Education as they have very low skills. There is no other VT program that offers a free path to a high school credential for people age 16 and older. The state offers many tech ed programs and pathways to a better career but many of our students lack the basic skills to participate successfully in these tech ed programs, free college programs or workforce training.

Adult Education and Literacy is included in Title 16: Education

Chapter 023: Courses of Study under Subchapter 002: Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion and includes

- Flexible Pathways Initiative
- High School Completion Program
- Adult Diploma Program; General Education Development Program

SLIDE 6 Michelle

Our work changes lives. Sarah, pictured on the left of the slide, attended VAL to earn her diploma. She continued her education with CCV and is now the owner of a thriving interior design business in Brattleboro. VAL helped her meet life, academic, and career goals.

Keionna, pictured on the right, started her adult education and literacy journey at The Tutorial Center in Bennington when she was 16 years old. She said that she had felt hopeless for the future but three and a half years later she is accomplishing goals she didn't think were possible. The Tutorial Center's flexibility enabled her to work, get her driver's license, her first car and apartment and earn a High School diploma. She did all this while caring for a disabled family member.

Students come to us at all skill levels, from no literacy or very low literacy all the way through middle school and high school literacy levels – much like a public school system would have a range of levels. We are now seeing many younger students from 16 to 20 years old who have rarely attended school over the last 3 years and have very low academic skills, need a great deal of individualized attention and are coming to us with many barriers.

We know that there are many, many more of these young adults out there, and within 3 to 5 years they will become stressors on Vermont's economy. A robust and sustainable AEL system will be their first and only stop for high school credentials, academic skills, and pathways to fill workforce needs.

As a network, our students are 58% female, 22% BIPOC though this varies from region to region. At VAL in Chittenden County 40% of students identify as non-white.

46% have at least 1 disability,

53% are unemployed and most are living in poverty and

100% come to us with barriers to employment

76% of these students came to us with no high school credentials. Some may take years to earn a credential, while others do so in shorter time periods. Over the last 5 years, 903 students earned a high school diploma and 209 earned a GED.

Many of our students either joined the workforce or went on to post secondary education - including college and job training. A number of our students received Industry Recognized Credentials. These Vermonters would likely never have been able to do so if not for the AEL system and the services we provide.

SLIDE 7 Brian - Petagaye

Vermont's AEL system is integral to the workforce development picture in Vermont, helping to fill positions in high need sectors.

Petagaye, pictured in the slide, dropped out of high school in 9th grade, when she got pregnant. As a single parent she worked menial jobs to provide for her daughter. With little education and

few skills, she worked in housekeeping to put her daughter through college, and then a master's program. Her daughter is now a practicing mental health counselor in Vermont.

Petagaye's came to CVABE for both citizenship and English Language Learning. Petagaye and her daughter became citizens on the same day. Her pride when speaking of it is palpable.

She then received her high school credential through High School Completion. As part of her program she also obtained her LNA license, and she works in a care home, doing what she loves. Her life has been transformed. Although she credits AEL as being a "miracle," we know that it's because of her hard work and access to Vermont's Adult Education and Literacy services.

Petagaye had goals for her family, her academics, and for her career. Through her determination and CVABE's support she was able to realize them. In her time at CVABE she was in every program that AEL offers, from Citizenship to high school credentialing. Every one of our students across the State has a story, with history, goals, and pitfalls along the way. So many, like Petagaye, have changed their lives through our programs and have become integral parts of our economy.

Last year alone 21 AELN students earned an Industry Recognized Credential. Twenty-three entered post-secondary or job training programs. Our work is helping to fill the workforce needs, and the additional funding will allow us to continue this essential work.

SLIDE 8 Michelle

Between 2018 and 2022, AEL providers served over 10,000 Vermonters, some of these students being served and counted over multiple years, each with their own goals, such as

- improving their skills in reading, writing and math
- obtaining a job or a better job
- earning a high school diploma or a GED
- achieving a certification or other credentials for a job
- attending college after discovering that college was not only possible but a desire
- and new Vermonters looking to improve their English language abilities so they could become a contributing part of the Vermont workforce.

Slide 9 Brian

Vermont has invested millions of dollars in job training programs and free college. Those with low literacy, low skills, or no high school credentials are unable to access those programs. AEL is the first stop on the ladder, and we are creating opportunities for first Vermonters to obtain job credentials, take advantage of free training programs, and like Petagaye, move into high need sectors. Your support of this additional \$1.5 million is an investment in our untapped labor market, and will strengthen our economy.

Vermont's AEL can be compared to a medium sized VT school district. We serve around 2,000 of the most high need students a year. We operate under the guidance of the Agency of Education

and our programs are in statute. Our students range in reading and math levels from pre-k through high school, with rapidly growing ELL populations. Close to 200 of our students a year obtain a high school credential. We do this at a fraction of the cost of our school systems.

We ask that you support our request for the additional \$1.5 million of base funding for the Adult Education and Literacy Network providers. The one time funding we received in FY 2023 was vital, but not sustainable.

We would like to thank you again for your time and for listening to this presentation, for supporting Vermonters who need our services, and for supporting the Vermont Adult Education and Literacy Network.

At this time, we are more than happy to answer any questions you may have.